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Sex Publisher: 'If You Got It, Flaunt It'

By Franklynn Peterson

O. LEANING BACK in his armchair behind a cluttered desk in his New York office, 49-year-old publisher Lyle Stuart cheerfully exclaims: "Look at the current best-seller lists! Random House has four bestsellers among the nonfiction top 10, and the combined circulation of those four is less than that of my 'Sensuous Woman,' which has already sold 610,000 copies."

Boasting is as natural to Stuart as drinking, dating and sleeping. "I've only been to one publisher's party in the last year, and I went to that one dressed as sloppily as possible, just to shake everyone up," he boasted slightly. "I don't care what they think of me. They all know what I think of them. I do \$4½ or \$5 million a year gross. How many publishers can say that?"

Aside from "The Sensuous Woman" and its sequel, "The Sensuous Man," the Stuart fortune has been helped along by Dr. Albert Ellis' long-playing library of sexual how-, why- and when-to books. Nevertheless, Stuart goes out of the way to point out that his publishing company's success was not really founded on sex tomes.

His first venture was a racy expose tabloid, Independent, which he published while holding down a full-time job as business manager of Mad magazine. Stuart used to delight in needling Waller Winchell in his Independent, and when the provoked columnist struck back too hard, Stuart countered by winning a \$21,000 libel judgment.

With this largesse, he then proceeded to finance his first book, "The Pulse Test," a popularized medical work by Imogene Coca's uncle, Dr. Arthur Coca.

Dr. Coca contended that by daily recording one's own pulse's highs and lows, a person can keep close tabs on the state of his health, as well

as avoid painful allergies. The book lost \$4,500 in its first half-year in print.

"Instead of dumping it like other publishers would have done," Stuart says with a toss of his shaggy head, "I sank another \$8,000 into ads with money I had won from Walter Winchell. And then the book took off?"

To date, it has sold a comfortable 50,000 copies. Out of his share of the profits, Stuart bought his own \$200 pulse meter to save the drudgery of counting his pulse for 15 seconds every morning. "Well, if you got it, flaunt it," he proclaims jauntily.

Having learned his lesson with "The Pulse Test," Lyle Stuart continues to write all of his own book ads. He's willing to delegate what he calls less important jobs to employees, like reading manuscripts and writing checks.

"The most important thing to keep in mind when writing ads for a book is don't promise more than you can deliver," he says. "You can fool book buyers once or twice with an inflated ad, but they'll catch on."

Early Stuart successes included books by Jim Peck, a leader of C. O. R. E. ["We Who Would Not Kill"], and once-blacklisted film writer Dalton Trumbo [the unnervingly powerful novel "Johnny Got His Gun"]. Trumbo's book was made into a film that created a sensation at this year's Cannes Festival.

Another nonsex title Stuart, issued in 1960, was "The Gangrene," a narrative about Algerians who were tortured by French police overzealous in their efforts to stop the tide of revolution. In the introduction which he personally wrote for the volume, Stuart says, "This book probably would not have been published in America if the French government had not ordered its seizure in France.

"The Lyle Stuart imprint on a book has very often come to designate a book that other publishers hesitate to publish because it might offend pressure groups. This book has offended the entire French government."

When Stuart published Juan Arevalo's "The Shark and the Sardines" in 1961, he was called on by former Sen. Thomas Dodd to testify before the latter's Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. The book, in Stuart's words, "told Americans what Latin American intellectuals thought about the United States. Up until that time we thought we were everybody's heroes."

The senator and Stuart exchanged barbs thruout the hearings, ending in Stuart's words on the closed session, "by Dodd breaking the gavel and calling me the most impudent witness he had ever heard." Stuart thinks of this incident as a triumph for the good guys.

According to Stuart, he fired one of the first shots of the sex revolution in 1958 by putting out Dr. Albert Ellis' "Sex Without Guilt." He recalls that Esquire magazine turned down ads for the book because they said it was, "too pro-sex." "We were the first to publish books which said sex wasn't bad—it's good for you, it's fun, live it up."

"Before we came on the scene, books would say, 'Don't do too much and be careful.' We then got the reputation for being hot-book publishers, which we aren't really."

Ebulliently, Stuart boasts, "We broke the United States custom ban against importing erotic art and broke the Post Office ban against sending birth control information and

advocating birth control thru the mail." Stuart also points out that he did this without court trials and flamboyant publicity.

In a poetic mood, Stuart says, "Every one of my books is like a painting, but 'The Sensuous Woman' was like my Rembrandt." J, the not-so-anonymous author, used to work for Stuart publicizing books. "She couldn't write," Stuart recalls.

"She had perpetual writer's block. But she was just as sweet and homely as could be, and honest. I eventually left my employ, but we kept in touch. One day she told me how broke she was," Stuart recalls.

"So I told her to write me one chapter of a book on how to be the world's sexiest woman. She brought me the whipped cream chapter and I gave her \$500 right on the spot."

He boasts that he has never read any of the manuscripts of his bestsellers except his first, "The Pulse Test."

"I do better by picking the right person—a friend or freelance reader—to go over a manuscript and tell me whether it's worth publishing. If the answer is 'yes,' I promote the hell out of it," he explains.

This year, Stuart's iconoclasm has shifted from sex to politics. He has high hopes for "The Anarchist Cookbook," despite the fact that it has been widely denounced. Already 20,000 copies have been sold, both hardcover and soft. Featured in the book are a variety of how-tos, ranging from a recipe for pot pie made with marijuana to detailed diagrams for successfully dynamiting a bridge.

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